

# The Background of the Enthroned

## *Spatial Analysis of the Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*

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The Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (BZ.1929.1, fig. 1) in the Dumbarton Oaks collection—usually, if tentatively, dated to the sixth century—is a magnificent textile that, in many sections, is still in very good condition. In the center, the goddess Hestia—specified by an inscription as πολυόλβος, “rich in blessings”—sits on a precious throne.<sup>1</sup> Three genii on each side rush toward her, holding bowls or disks inscribed with the following terms: at the top, ΠΛΟΥΤΟΣ (*ploutos* = wealth, richness) and [Ε]ΥΦΡΟ[CVN]Η (*euphrosyne* = mirth, cheerfulness); in the center, ΕΥΛΟ[ΓΙΑ] (*eulogia* = praise, fame) and ΕΥΩΧΙΑ (*euochia* = festivity, entertainment, abundance); and at the bottom, ΑΡΕΤΗ (*arete* = excellence, virtue, merit) and ΠΡΟΚΟΠΗ (*prokope* = progress, improvement).<sup>2</sup> Two standing figures, a man to the left and a woman to the right, flank the scene, each bearing an object in their hands; the woman’s can be identified as a kind of box or plaque

with the inscription ΦΩC (*phos* = light).<sup>3</sup> Today’s upper rim of the textile has the shape of a semicircle.

The scene is dynamic and ambiguous: Hestia and the two flanking figures at the sides emanate a majestic, ceremonial quietness; the six genii, on the other hand, enliven the scene. The flowers that fill the background are indicative of an outdoor scene, a natural environment echoed by the fruits and foliage that decorate the figures’ headdresses (figs. 2–3). Yet Hestia’s throne is a valuable wooden or metal furnishing, enriched by pearls and precious stones and outfitted with a luxurious red cushion; it is an object one would expect in an elite or cultic interior. The colors of the flowers contrast with the dark blue background, providing a sense of depth, which seems to be dissolved again by the staggered, two-dimensional arrangement of the six genii. Amid all these busy details, the three halos surrounding the heads of Hestia and the two flanking figures create lustrous “quiet” spots.

Where and how was this weaving used and what should the viewer understand when looking at this depiction? Following a short survey of research done on this textile, the present study will focus on the original shape of the weaving and its composition, as well as on evidence from other monuments. It will conclude with a note about its peculiar state of preservation.

1 The hanging measures 114.5 centimeters in height and 138 centimeters at its widest part, at the bottom. The inscription reads ΕCΤΙΑ ΠΟΛΥΟΛΒΟΣ; for the English translation of this term, see P. Friedländer, *Documents of Dying Paganism: Textiles of Late Antiquity in Washington, New York, and Leningrad* (Berkeley, CA, 1945), 4. The hanging was acquired in 1929 by Robert Woods and Mildred Barnes Bliss. There is no reliable information on the findspot; the files contain the note: “Egypt, said to have been excavated at Sohag near Akhmim.” Radiocarbon dating has not yet been undertaken, but would certainly be an important step toward dating not only this weaving but also others related to it.

2 Friedländer’s translations; *ibid.*, 7.

3 For a detailed description, see *ibid.* and <http://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/catalogue/BZ.1929.1>.



Fig. 1. Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos, ca. sixth century; tapestry weave in polychrome wool; 114.5 × 138 cm. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1929.1. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

### Past Research on the Hestia Hanging

Surprisingly, archaeologists and art historians did not often deal with this textile, despite its unusual iconography and its good condition. Influential as to the interpretation and reconstruction of the hanging were Paul Friedländer, in 1945, and Giacomo Manganaro, in 1960, who both derived their interpretations from the intriguing inscriptions on the hanging, and who both meant to detect an influence of Christian thought and iconography.<sup>4</sup> It is not the aim of this essay to discuss

or revise these interpretations in full, but rather to focus on the use of this and other furnishing textiles in private and public spaces. In this respect, Friedländer suggested that the hanging also originally terminated at its top in a semicircle and therefore must have been used in an apse, a lunette, or a similarly arched space.<sup>5</sup> His interpretation of the two flanking figures also informs his assumptions about the context in which the hanging might have been used. Whereas he saw a “companion”

4 Friedländer, *Documents of Dying Paganism*, esp. 17–18 and 21–26; G. Manganaro, “La dea della casa e la Euphrosyne nel Basso

Impero,” *ArchCl* 12 (1960): 189–207. For an extended bibliography see the online catalogue entry.

5 Friedländer, *Dying Paganism*, 1–2.





Fig. 2. Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing flowers in the background and the genius on the upper right. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

of Hestia in the woman to the right—meaning in this case a personification of light—he interpreted the corresponding male figure to the left to be either a priest in the Orphic cult, a poet reading related literature, or even Orpheus himself.<sup>6</sup> It was obvious to him that the hanging was an object utilized for the veneration of Hestia. Manganaro did not deal in detail with the question of where the hanging was used, but he also considered it an object of devotion. He interpreted the standing woman as an allegory of Christ as light, or possibly of his mother Mary in connection with light, and the standing man as the donor or commissioner of

6 Ibid., 10, 12–14, 17; for his interpretation of the hanging as an object of veneration, see esp. 4 and 7.



Fig. 3. Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing Hestia's headdress. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

the valuable hanging, probably an emperor. This indicated to him a very elite context for the textile's display.

In her unpublished catalogue of Dumbarton Oaks' Byzantine textiles, completed in 1976, Deborah Thompson proposed that the upper part of the hanging had been cut to its shape already in antiquity because of the cut weft threads she saw at the top. This led her to conclude that the piece had once hung in a space with a similar shape, such as a niche or a lunette.<sup>7</sup> As for the iconography of the flanking figures, she saw a close relationship to the rendering of archangels and donors in

7 D. Thompson, "Catalogue of Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection" (unpublished catalogue, Washington, DC, 1976), 11, no. 47.





Fig. 4. Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing the wide variety of colors used in the weft. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

early Christian apses.<sup>8</sup> One aim of this paper, however, is to show that a semicircular shape at the top of the textile cannot be proven (and even is unlikely) and that, therefore, an apse-like place of use cannot be deduced. Another objective is to shed new light on the meaning of the flanking figures.

### Technique and the Original Shape of the Textile

Friedländer, Manganaro, and Thompson used the surviving outer shape of the hanging to speculate on its original placement and purpose. A review of the weaving and of its state of preservation, and close

examination of the threads in the upper edge of the textile, show that this is not as self-evident as it seems.<sup>9</sup>

The textile was executed in tapestry weave, using wool in the warp as well as in the weft. In the weft, an admirable variety of colors was employed (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> Tapestry is the most frequently used technique in weavings from late antiquity. If the weave is carefully executed, the difference between front and rear can hardly be discerned.<sup>11</sup> It was employed for decorative motifs on clothing and furnishing textiles, including large blankets and wall hangings, of which examples of

9 I want to offer my sincere thanks to Dr. Gudrun Bühl for allowing me to study the textile closely.

10 For discussion of a hanging with a similar variety of colors, and a close examination of the technique employed here, see D. Willers and B. Nickamp, *Der Dionysosbehang der Abegg-Stiftung* (Riggisberg, 2015), 205–8.

11 Unfortunately details of the rear side were not documented before the textile was mounted to its present background.

8 Ibid., 12, 15, no. 47.



astounding size have survived.<sup>12</sup> Some of these hangings display their decoration against a whitish background, using linen in weft and warp for these sections, while others use a dark color for the background, giving the depiction a mysterious depth. For this latter group, the whole warp is covered by woolen, dyed weft threads, and the weavers often used wool for the warp as well.<sup>13</sup> Technically, this is the group of weavings to which the Hestia hanging belongs. Based on these parallels and the size of the figures—Hestia herself has a height of about one meter—we can assume that this textile was originally a wall hanging, as acknowledged by all scholars so far.

The original width and shape of the Hestia hanging cannot be determined, as no original borders, edges, or any kind of reinforcement belonging to a selvege has survived. The direction of the warp, however, could suggest that the hanging was once wider than it is now. The warp of a textile would normally run parallel to the vertical axis of the composition. Yet, the width of a loom was limited. To execute a tapestry wider than the loom would allow (especially if wider than about two and a half meters) the weavers could manufacture the textile by turning the composition around 90 degrees, so that the warp would run horizontally across the composition, not vertically. In this way, a finished weaving could reach an enormous width.<sup>14</sup> A warp running horizontally across the decoration, as we find on the Hestia

hanging, can therefore indicate that the weaving was originally rather wide, although there are exceptions.<sup>15</sup>

The original height also cannot be determined. The remnants of a decorative border framing the bottom of the image—a monochromatic red band atop a yellow one—indicate that we must be close to the original lower end of the textile. However, I see no surviving evidence of the upper end of the weaving. As mentioned above, the upper, rounded part of the fragment has led scholars to assume this to be the original upper shape of the hanging and to conclude that the hanging was used in an apse-like space or a lunette. Yet, close analysis proves that what has survived cannot have been the terminal upper border of the hanging. Although most of the dark blue weft threads are cut, broken, or torn (fig. 5) and do not allow for a reconstruction of the hanging's top, there are several small sections at the top right where the intact weft threads turn around and go backward again (fig. 6). These turning wefts do not continue as far upward as others in the middle of the hanging do. This indicates two things. First, the different length of these threads indeed speaks for an arch-like line on the upper part of the Hestia hanging. But second, this line was not yet the upper end of the hanging. The turning threads are not typical of an ordinary selvege, because in this case the warp threads would lie much closer to each other to form a tighter weaving, needed for the end of the hanging. The detected turning wefts, instead, are typical of a "color selvege" indicating that next to it another color was used. The turning blue wefts, therefore, are evidence for an arch-like design, not for an arch-like end of the hanging itself. The blue background might well have terminated in the shape of a semicircle, describing an apse-, grotto-, or niche-like area in which all the figures appear. Above this semicircular edge, more tapestry weave in another color must have followed. The upper semicircular end of the fragment, which so easily makes us assume a rounded end of the hanging, is therefore not the original top of the

12 Blanket (?), 196 × 138 cm, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 12 717; M. Martiniani-Reber, *Tissus coptes* (Geneva, 1991), no. 13, plate 10. A probable curtain made for a door or arcade, 325 × 180 cm, The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, 71.118; J. Trilling, *The Roman Heritage: Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 300 to 600 AD* (Washington, DC, 1982), 31, no. 1, plate 1, fig. 1. Wall hanging with Dionysos, 210 × 700 cm (minimum), Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, 3100a; Willers and Niekamp, *Dionysosbehang*, and S. Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* (Riggisberg, 2004), 27–34, no. 1.

13 See, e.g., the wall hanging with Mary in the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1967.144 (fig. 11): D. Shepherd, "The Icon of the Virgin," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 56, no. 3 (1969): 91–120, and J. Engemann, *Römische Kunst in Spätantike und frühem Christentum bis Justinian* (Munich, 2014), 252. The hanging with Meleager and Atalante in Riggisberg (Abegg-Stiftung, 1100) has a warp completely covered by woolen wefts, and is one of the few examples with a linen warp: Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes*, 41, no. 5. It is not clear yet whether the woolen warp completely covered by wefts is an identifying feature for the specific region in which these hangings were made.

14 See, e.g., the width of the Dionysos hanging mentioned in n12.

15 Two hangings whose width corresponds to that of the Hestia hanging have warps running in different directions and therefore do not support the suggestion that the Dumbarton Oaks hanging was originally much wider. The hanging with Mary in Cleveland ("just" ca. 1.10 m wide) has a warp running along the horizontal axis of the figures (fig. 11), as does Hestia. By contrast, the Meleager and Atalante hanging in the Abegg-Stiftung (1.56 m wide, without original selvages, but based on the design probably not originally wider) has a warp running along the vertical axis. See above, n13.



Fig. 5.  
Detail of Hanging  
with Hestia Polyolbos  
(fig. 1), showing left  
upper edge with  
broken or cut weft  
threads. Artwork in  
the public domain;  
photograph  
© Dumbarton Oaks,  
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Washington, DC.



Fig. 6.  
Detail of Hanging  
with Hestia Polyolbos  
(fig. 1), showing right  
upper edge with  
turning weft threads  
(photo taken from  
the top). Artwork in  
the public domain;  
photograph  
© Dumbarton Oaks,  
Byzantine Collection,  
Washington, DC.



weave. It is very likely that, at a certain moment in the modern life of the hanging, the top was cut along this color selvage.

It follows that we cannot safely reconstruct the original upper shape of the hanging, but it was certainly not what survives today. Most probably the hanging itself terminated in a horizontal line, which would technically be the easiest means of finishing the textile. We have to state, therefore, that the hanging's original

placement cannot be deduced from its current shape. It is possible that the composition originally included a framing device surrounding Hestia and the accompanying figures, such as the depiction of a wall next to the niche, or pillars, perhaps as part of an arcade.<sup>16</sup>

16 Such a framing device could also have taken the form of a gable, as in the hangings with Mary in Cleveland (fig. 11) and Meleager and Atalante in Riggisberg. Friedländer mentioned such a design as



What impact does this have on the interpretation of the depiction? And what does this mean for the function of the hanging and the place where it might have been used? As the original shape of the hanging does not answer these questions, we should look at the tapestry's pictorial composition.

### The Composition of the Hestia Hanging

To determine where the scene takes place, the composition of the hanging needs a close analysis again. In it, the arrangement of the genii is a particularly unusual feature. Friedländer reproduced a parallel to this composition: a late antique mosaic depicting a head of Oceanos, with two Nereids in a staggered composition at each side.<sup>17</sup> This is the only late antique/early Byzantine image I know of that shows companion figures "piled up" next to a more important, central figure (in this case Oceanos, represented by his head). However, as the Nereids do not bring objects to the central figure or receive any from him, the parallel is not very close. In addition, Friedländer does not use this mosaic as a comparison for the genii, but rather to explain the frontal view of Hestia. Altogether, no clear parallel to the composition on the Hestia hanging has yet been published.

The arrangement of the genii above each other is strictly linear: they create two straight, vertical lines, almost forming a break between Hestia and the flanking figures. One could draw two slightly arched vertical lines through the disks they hold, with the two genii in the middle being slightly farther away from Hestia than the four others. Although this could indicate space around Hestia, there is no attempt (nor any wish, it seems) to position the genii naturally in space. Each has an identical wide stance and does not stand on a base, as often appears in other works from late antiquity. The composition does not create the impression of a three-dimensional room.

well; however, he was thinking in terms of a gable-like end for the hanging.

17 Sixth-century (?) mosaic from Aïn-Témouchent near Setif, Algeria, showing a head of Oceanos, with two Nereids in a staggered composition at each side, Algiers Museum, Alg. 318: K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford, 1978), 151–52, plate LVI, and Friedländer, *Dying Paganism*, 23, plate 8.

There is an advantage to this arrangement. No genius is clearly farther away from Hestia than another, suggesting that all their attributes have the same importance and estimation. One could argue that the goddess herself seems to contradict this interpretation, as she is touching the two disks in the middle only—ΕΥΛΟ[ΓΙΑ] and ΕΥΩΧΙΑ. Friedländer, however, described the arrangement of the nine figures on the hanging as five "columns," formed by the two flanking figures, the two lines of genii, and Hestia.<sup>18</sup> In connecting herself to one of the genii on either side, Hestia is actually "touching" the whole "column." So, her gesture toward the middle disk on each side actually accounts for all six disks. Altogether, this creates a tight link between Hestia and the six genii—indeed, the genii are extensions of the goddess—which is very different from the usual depictions of figures approaching and presenting offerings to a venerated being.<sup>19</sup>

Although these observations underline the connection between the genii and Hestia, other details in the arrangement separate Hestia from the genii and the other two figures. The positioning of the composition's inscriptions serve to underscore the closeness between all the figures accompanying Hestia, but not between those figures and Hestia herself. The inscription ΕΣΤΙΑ ΠΟΛΥΟΛΒΟΣ appears at the apex of the surviving composition, above the goddess's nimbus and directly on the dark blue background. By contrast, the weavers placed the terms related to the genii on the round surfaces of the disks. Similarly, the term ΦΩΣ (light) appears on the rectangular box or plaque carried by the woman to the right; this object is the same shade of blue as the disks held by the genii, and is bordered by a band of yellow outlined in black. The man to the left appears to hold the same type of object in front of his chest, but much of it has been damaged: some of its blue surface and yellow border remains, but any inscription it may once have had is now lost (fig. 7).<sup>20</sup> The inscriptions thus fall into two types. ΕΣΤΙΑ ΠΟΛΥΟΛΒΟΣ identifies the goddess and her representation as the sum of the gifts and of the virtues presented by the other

18 Ibid., 2.

19 Compare, e.g., the donors in the apses of the Eufasian basilica in Poreč and San Vitale in Ravenna.

20 The interpretation of this figure is in contrast to Friedländer, *Dying Paganism*, 15–17, who does not interpret the man as a figure from the same realm as Hestia.



Fig. 7.  
Detail of Hanging with  
Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1),  
showing standing male  
figure to the left.  
Artwork in the public  
domain; photograph  
© Dumbarton Oaks,  
Byzantine Collection,  
Washington, DC.



figures. It is something like the title of the hanging. The other inscriptions, in contrast, each mention one of many the attributes or virtues of Hestia and do not necessarily identify the particular figure presenting it. This very clearly sets Hestia apart while connecting the other eight figures.

This relationship between the inscriptions leads me to conclude that the two outer figures belong to the same sphere as the genii. They cannot, therefore, be donors or priest, as Manganaro and Friedländer

suggested, but have the same function and purpose within the composition as the genii: to symbolize features of Hestia. Further research will be needed to identify the man to the left, also taking into account his sandals. His position in the composition, however, suggests that he is a personification as well, just like the woman who personifies light.<sup>21</sup>

21 Friedländer's interpretation of the figure as Orpheus would only be convincing, in my eyes, if the figure had a related attribute

Further iconographical features support the interpretation that all the figures belong to the same realm, and that none represents a real human being. First, it is surprising that all the figures are wearing large headdresses. Hestia's is very delicate and striking: it seems to be interwoven into her hair and contains pomegranates on a string or a twig (fig. 3). The headdress of the man looks like a wide band decorated with grapes (fig. 7), while the seven other figures appear to wear crowns of grapes and/or other fruits. In spite of these differences, the attributes are similar in that they are organic and draw the nine figures together into the realm of nature. In addition, the three nimbi create a close visual connection between Hestia and the standing figures that flank the scene. The genii, by their nature, would not need any nimbi to express the closeness to Hestia and can appear without halo often in late antique art.

### Evidence from Other Late Antique Artworks

The analysis of the composition, including the arrangement of the genii and the positioning of the inscriptions, suggests that all the figures represent Hestia and her values and belong to the same sphere, and moreover that the standing figures who flank Hestia should not be interpreted as donors or other human beings. How does this result compare to compositions with gods or high-ranking persons and accompanying figures on other monuments and objects from late antiquity?

Related compositions include those that display their scene on a real, architectonic apse, like early Christian church apses, and those where an apse, arcade, or arch is part of the depiction itself. Among these examples there is a further distinction, between compositions in which the figures communicate, and those in which the figures are arranged more statically, side by side, as we see in the Hestia hanging.

A group of people surrounding a central person in a semicircular arrangement can easily be shown on the curved wall of an apse. In the apses of Santa Pudenziana in Rome (fig. 8) and Sant'Aquilino in Milan,<sup>22</sup> the depicted figures communicate in a lively way. In each

case the enthroned Christ is slightly raised between the apostles who surround him. The result is very different from the Hestia hanging, where nearly all the figures are standing on the same line.

In contrast, the apses of the Eufasian basilica in Poreč (fig. 9) and San Vitale in Ravenna, for example, present their figures in a static, linear scene.<sup>23</sup> In Poreč, Mary enthroned with child appears in the middle of the apse. Next to her is an archangel on either side, followed by three more male figures per side (and a young boy on the left). The men are saints, the legendary first bishop of the town, and the contemporary bishop and donor, Eufasius, accompanied by a deacon. The figures hold books and wreaths in their hands, except for Eufasius, who holds a model of the church. The composition's arrangement, with the figures lined up, mainly looking out of the apse (and not at each other), and their bodies mostly parallel to the background, comes much closer to the composition of the Dumbarton Oaks hanging than the depictions in Santa Pudenziana and Sant'Aquilino, especially if one compares Mary and the archangels to Hestia and the flanking figures. The same composition can be observed in San Vitale, where an enthroned Christ is surrounded by archangels, with the donor appearing on the right. The way ΦΩC and her male counterpart hold their attribute does not correspond to the way the donors in the mosaics from Ravenna and Poreč submissively offer their church models to Christ and Mary. Rather, the two flanking figures on the hanging holding their attribute are in a position analogous to that of the archangels in these mosaics. The six genii on the weaving seem to be simply inserted into this group.

Works with a depicted apse, arcade, or arch are of still more interest, as their background is flat like the Hestia hanging. Again, there are "communication scenes," such as two illuminations from the mid-sixth-century Rossano Gospel (fig. 10).<sup>24</sup> They show that not much is needed to indicate an apsidal chamber: a thin bent line above the heads, which must have existed on the Hestia hanging as well, if we keep in mind the color

(like a lyre). Regardless of the fragmentary state of this section of the textile, however, from what we can see of the front of the figure's breast or stomach, such an object was not included.

22 Santa Pudenziana, ca. 400 CE: Engemann, *Römische Kunst*, 118, fig. 102; Sant'Aquilino, probably fifth century: *ibid.*, 128, fig. 112.

23 Apse of Eufasian basilica: B. Brenk, ed., *Spätantike und frühes Christentum* (Frankfurt, 1977), fig. 375; San Vitale, apse: Engemann, *Römische Kunst*, 145, fig. 128. Both date to the mid-sixth century.

24 Rossano, Museo Diocesano e del Codex, Cod. Rossanensis, Ms. 042, fols. 8r and 8v: K. Weitzmann, *Spätantike und frühchristliche Buchmalerei* (Munich, 1977), fig. 30–31.



Fig. 8.  
Apse of Santa Pudenziana,  
Rome, ca. 400 CE. Artwork  
in the public domain;  
photograph by Welleschik /  
Wikimedia Commons.  
CC BY-SA 3.0.



Fig. 9.  
Apse of Eufasian  
Basilica, Poreč,  
mid-sixth century.  
Artwork in the public  
domain; photograph by  
Renko Kosinožić,  
provided by Dumbarton  
Oaks, Image Collections  
and Fieldwork Archives,  
Washington, DC, Henry  
Maguire and Ann Terry  
Poreč Archive,  
1990s–2000s, MSBZ015-  
2012-0076-0002.



selfedge detected and described above. The sense of communication is achieved by a semicircular arrangement of figures.

Just as no semicircular arrangement was chosen for the hanging and Hestia's throne is not moved to an upper position, we can conclude that a "communication scene" cannot have been intended on the Hestia hanging.<sup>25</sup> It

does not depict figures engaged in a discussion or a donation, but shows figures on a horizontal ground line and in the same realm. A clear parallel to the Hestia hanging is the hanging in the Cleveland Museum of Art, on which an enthroned Virgin and Child are flanked by archangels, the one at the right holding a globe (fig. 11).

This linear, side-by-side composition is even more evident on the silver Missorium of Theodosius in Madrid

25 See also a representation of Christ and the apostles on a lunette in the Catacombs of Via Latina, Rome, A-2 (late fourth century), which shows a different arrangement than the Dumbarton

Oaks hanging: N. Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen römischer Katakombenmalerei* (Münster, 2002), 69–70, plate 4, fig. 22.





Fig. 10.  
Christ before Pilate,  
Codex Rossanensis  
(Rossano Gospel),  
sixth century. Rossano,  
Museo Diocesano e del  
Codex, Ms. 042, fol. 8v.  
Artwork in the public  
domain; photograph by  
Dsmdgold / Wikimedia  
Commons.

(fig. 12), as we look at the three central figures.<sup>26</sup> The surface of the Missorium is flat, like the hanging, so the challenge for the artist to express depth in a composition would have been the same—yet the artist was not interested in this. In spite of the architectonic setting, he created a rather flat scene. And as is true for the two flanking figures on the hanging, the two colleagues of Theodosius do not communicate with him but accompany him to

emphasize the majestic sphere of the emperor. As in the apses of San Vitale and the Eufasian basilica, this is a static representation. The main figure is placed in the middle, under an arch; two flanking co-emperors appear beneath the same dignifying architecture. These two figures hold globes, underlining the universal claim of the scene as a whole, above all of the central figure. In later depictions of majestic, central groups in Christian art, the role of the co-emperors is taken up by the archangels. The strong influence of imperial art on Christian iconography is striking.

26 Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, dated by its inscription to 388 CE: Engemann, *Römische Kunst*, 51, fig. 45.





Fig. 11. Icon of the Virgin and Child, sixth century; wool, 178.7 × 110.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund, 1967.144. CC0 1.0.

Also through this comparison, the intention of the Hestia weavers becomes clear. The figures depicted on the Hestia hanging all belong to the same sphere. The flanking figures are equivalent to corulers or guards in imperial representations, and to archangels on Christian monuments. They emphasize the plentiful virtues and gifts of the central figure, with the archangels' globes paralleling the "light" of the female figure to the right on the Hestia hanging. They should not be interpreted as human donors, but rather as personifications of Hestia's power and attributes. The six genii serve the same function. Their insertion in two lines between the flanking figures and Hestia is without parallel, yet makes it a livelier presentation than the apsidal composition.



Fig. 12. Missorium of Emperor Theodosius I, silver, modern replica of 388 CE original. Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Ángel M. Felicísimo / Wikimedia Commons. CC BY 3.0.

## Conclusion

Based on these interpretations, can we speculate on the hanging's original location and installation? Its depiction of Hestia expresses the majestic and varied power of the goddess, akin to representations of emperors, Christ, or Mary. In contrast to some apses in early Christian churches, however, no donors are represented; rather, the two figures flanking Hestia correspond to the middle group of archangels or saints appearing on apses. This brings the Dumbarton Oaks hanging closer to the Cleveland hanging and to the Missorium in Madrid. The latter comparison also demonstrates the influence of imperial art on both hangings and their iconography, not the influence of Christian art on "dying paganism."<sup>27</sup>

The character of these works of art, in combination with their size, seems to be more "private," individual, and intimate, unlike a donation in a public space. For the works with religious subjects—that is, the

27 I here quote the "catchy" title of Friedländer's book. As I do not see a strong influence of Christian compositions on the Hestia hanging, I tend to interpret the cross-like item on Hestia's forehead as merely a hair ornament, not as a Christian symbol. However, more research on these items is needed.





Fig. 13a. Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the upper-left genius, with repaired head (warp running vertically). Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.



Fig. 13b. Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the lower-left genius, with repaired head (warp running vertically). Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

two hangings—this might hint at a context of private devotion or personal epiphany.<sup>28</sup> The Cleveland hanging, completely justifiably, has always been called an “icon.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, a religious context, like a chapel, should not be the only place where one can imagine it being used. The same is true for the Hestia hanging. The Dumbarton Oaks hanging might just as likely have been the woven expression of a religious commitment, as an admired, prestigious piece of art. The audience hall of

a rich and high-ranking person, or his or her more private cubiculum, comes to mind as a potential context for these tapestries. Thomas F. Mathews, in his recent book on Egyptian panel paintings, suggests a variety of sites—temples, private houses, and churches—where frontal works depicting household gods could have been used. One site, house D at Kom el-Dikka, depicts a large composition like Hestia along a flat wall in a courtyard.<sup>30</sup>

28 See Friedländer, *Dying Paganism*, 4, 14.

29 Shepherd, “Icon of the Virgin,” and R. Eikermann, ed., *The Cleveland Museum of Art: Meisterwerke von 300 bis 1550* (Munich, 2007), 42–45, no. 6.

30 See Thomas F. Mathews, *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons* (Los Angeles, 2016), esp. 30 (on the east wall in the “Chapel of the Painted Niches” in Theadelphia) and 132 (on House D in Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria). Many thanks to Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, who brought this book to my attention.





a



b



c



d

These examples help us imagine the installation of such works in locations other than a central wall or apse.

### Additional Remark

There is a most astonishing technical detail on this textile, one which Friedländer was also aware of.<sup>31</sup> The hanging was repaired, probably during its “first life” in the late antique/early Byzantine period, in an extremely careful, elaborate way. The sections in question are the upper and lower genii on the left side. As figure 13 shows, the warp runs vertically here, in contrast to the rest of the hanging. The vertical warp is only present in the faces of these two genii, indicating that these elements were inserted later. The insertion was done so carefully that one has to look very closely to recognize where it starts and stops. However, Deborah Thompson was right in seeing some differences between the repairs and the original intact weaving. Comparing all the heads of the genii with

each other, certain details were rendered differently on the repairs (figs. 13a–b and 14a–d): the eyes of the latter, especially their pupils, were executed more like eyes seen in profile, the mouths are smaller, and the head-dresses are not as elaborate (not woven with two colors). Nevertheless, the threads seem to be very similar in structure and color, so I see no reason to doubt that this was an early, late antique repair.

Why did it become necessary to repair the textile, probably rather soon after it was finished? It would be very valuable to study more cases of ancient repairs in the future.

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31 See also Thompson, “Catalogue,” 5–8, no. 47.

### *Opposite page:*

Figs. 14a.

Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the lower-right genius. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

Fig. 14b.

Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the center-right genius. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

Fig. 14c.

Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the upper-right genius. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

Fig. 14d.

Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos (fig. 1), showing head of the center-left genius. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.



